

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE **34**NEW REPUBLIC
26 August 1985

HOW HOT WAS CHILE?

The Last Two Years of Salvador Allende
by Nathaniel Davis

(Cornell University Press, 480 pp., \$24.95)

Nathaniel Davis became United States ambassador to Chile in October 1971. He was still ambassador there at the time of the Pinochet coup, almost two years later, on September 11, 1973. On Friday, September 7, Ambassador Davis, who was visiting Washington, told Henry Kissinger that "the odds are in favor of a coup." Kissinger, in what he calls a "transcript" of this discussion, records the ambassador's statement as having been part of his answer to a question from Kissinger: "Will there be a coup?" The ambassador's recollection, however, is significantly different. "As I entered the room, Kissinger said: 'So there's going to be a coup in Chile!'" "I have no difficulty in believing the ambassador's version. It would be characteristic of Kissinger to want to show that he knew what was going on, in that remote place, before the "man on the spot" could start telling him. And also Kissinger probably did know more about the impending coup than his ambassador knew, or wanted to know, or was expected to know.

The timing of the ambassador's visit to Washington, just at the moment when the Chilean commanders were reaching their decision to overthrow Allende, has been interpreted by left-wing writers as evidence of U.S. complicity in the coup, or even of Washington's role in the masterminding of the coup. Davis's thoughtful, well-written, and valuable book rejects that interpretation. His account carries conviction, as far as his own personal role as ambassador was concerned. But that last is a drastically limited perspective, which skirts the general question of the many possible forms of American involvement, whether beneath the umbrella of the U.S. Embassy or outside that cover.

DAVIS convincingly shows that the Allende government was in deep trouble anyway, for economic and internal reasons, whether or not the United States had intervened. The sharp decline in the world price of copper in 1971 would have been bad news for whatever government was in office at

that time in Chile. Davis rightly rejects the left-wing theory that the American administration, with Chile in mind, caused the copper slump. There were too many other interests to be taken into account for such a move to be practical, capitalist politics. Allende simply had the bad luck of being the man who had to answer for it when a matter absolutely beyond his control went wrong.

But his own policies and his own rhetoric, and those of his party, made things worse. There was popular support for "antiforeign" left-wing measures, such as nationalizing copper. But the attempt to socialize what had been a free economy provoked vigorous internal opposition, and rallied no support outside the left wing of Allende's party, Unidad Popular. Even in his last year, Allende retained the electoral support of the working class and over 40 percent of the electorate, but that did nothing to avert a series of damaging strikes: a truckers' strike, a miners' strike, a sailors' strike, and so on. And the workers' paramilitary groups that formed in the barrios seemed less interested in defending or protecting their elected government than in promoting a Castro-type revolution, replacing Allende's democratic vision of socialism. The rise of the paramilitaries, and their impunity under Allende, did much to prompt the army commanders to think about a coup. And the coup, when it came, was probably welcomed by a majority of the population. It was certainly welcomed by Eduardo Frei, the leader of the Christian Democrats, who won 56 percent of the popular vote—as against 44 percent for Allende's Unidad Popular—in the elections for the Chamber of Deputies in March 1973, Chile's last free elections.

The attempt to carry out a major social-democratic revolution on the basis of a little less than half the popular vote was probably doomed in any case, even without any form of American intervention or encouragement. But was there, in fact, American intervention or encouragement? Davis accepts that—before his time in Chile, and therefore

before the actual coup—there had been a CIA plan, encouraged by Nixon, known as "Track II," "to investigate a coup d'état before Allende could be confirmed by the Chilean Congress in October [1970]." The plans went wrong at that point, and Track II either was abandoned or went underground. Davis—a former assistant secretary of state under President Johnson, and dovish rather than hawkish by temperament—likes to believe that Track II ideas had been abandoned before he became ambassador in Santiago. "In Chile, to conclude," he writes, "I am reasonably confident that nothing was done to me like the Track II deception of [Davis's predecessor] Ambassador [Edward M.] Korry."

I don't know how much confidence might be "reasonable" in such circumstances. After all, when Richard Helms

of the CIA, on September 15, 1970, took down the instructions from Nixon that were developed into Track II, one of Helms's notations read: "no involvement of embassy." That is not the kind of instruction that alters with a change of ambassador. And Davis acknowledges that, in intelligence operations, it is exceedingly hard to know where intelligence gathering ends, and where incitement begins. Davis acknowledges that "the acquisition of information may become consultation or encouragement," but goes on: "As the U.S. Ambassador in Chile, I was in no position to tell the C.I.A. station to stop collecting intelligence for fear of transmitting encouragement to plotters; I had to

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trust the C.I.A.'s ability to walk the line between intelligence collecting and covert action." Davis is a humorous man, as well as an intelligent one. I doubt he could read out that last sentence of his in company and keep a straight face.

Having read and considered Davis's account, and that of the Church Committee and others, I am inclined to believe that the involvement of the U.S. government in the development of the events that led to the coup of 1973 ran more or less as follows:

IN OCTOBER 1970 the CIA, impelled by President Nixon, tried to instigate an instant coup against Allende. This attempt failed, because of the "wait and see" attitude of the Chilean generals. After that, the U.S. administration, *faute de mieux*, adopted a policy of leaving Allende enough rope to hang himself. Money from American sources—both private and official—was available to the many varieties of Chilean malcontents. As for the generals, they knew, from October 1970 on, that an anti-Allende coup would be welcome in Washington. The "intelligence-gathering" CIA officers who were in touch with the generals did not have to keep on inciting their interlocutors explicitly in the direction of a coup. All they had to do was to refrain from dissipating the impression that a coup, undertaken in the generals' own good time, would still be welcome in Washington.

The generals did not carry out the coup because it would be welcome in Washington, and they might well have carried it out even if it had been unwelcome in Washington. But the knowledge that it would be welcome encouraged the more cautious among the generals. It suggested that the path of the postcoup regime could be made a lot smoother than Allende's had been. That the CIA officials, in quietly keeping coup-mindedness on the simmer among the generals, had the approval of Washington is hardly open to serious doubt. Even Davis, concerned as he is to maintain the "clean hands" of his own ambassadorial term, occasionally allows the Machiavellian realities to come through. At one point he briefly

considers whether, realizing as he did the imminent probability of a coup, he ought to have warned President Allende of what was afoot. Davis goes on: "Nobody ever contacted me about the possibility of warning Allende; in fact, I received no instructions at all on the subject. Had I proposed such an initiative, my Washington superiors would no doubt have concluded that I had gone around the bend."

Davis suggests that he himself, with his dovish inclinations and record, was "a slightly incongruous 'chosen instrument' for Richard Nixon's Chilean policy." Not really. The ambassador and the embassy were only a part of Nixon's Chilean policy—the respectable part. Nixon wanted a coup in Chile. He had conveyed the message, and the generals had filed it for reference and for possible action. Once the message had been conveyed, however, what Nixon most wanted from the embassy was "noninvolvement" and avoidance of "compromising acts." Ambassador Davis was an entirely appropriate instrument for that aspect of Nixon's policy. American covert intervention was, I believe, significantly stronger and more sustained than Davis seeks to suggest, or wishes to believe. Still, I don't believe the ultimate result in Chile would have been different if the United States had never engaged in covert intervention at all.

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Conor Cruise O'Brien's *The Siege: An Outsider Looks at Zionism* will be published by Simon and Schuster next spring.